

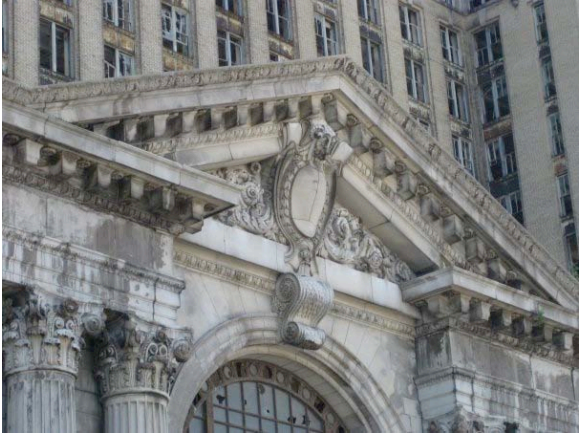
Michigan Central Station: Reframing the narrative of Detroit's grand past



Detroit's Michigan Central station is a powerful icon. Much photographed and discussed, the station acts as a politically charged receiver of the city's multiple histories. Strong, singular narratives have been mapped onto the building, particularly those of Detroit's "heroic" growth and its "shameful" decline. This essay will examine the first- the narrative of growth as embodied in the station, and consider what this narrative reveals about the identities of the station and the city. Revisiting the period of the station's development, it argues that the growth narrative obscures much, hiding contradictions present in the siting of the station. Reasserting forgotten aspects of the station's history can broaden our contemporary discourse and aids in framing the problem of reconstruction. It becomes clear that the city can only seek in vain to remake a mythic past at the station; rather, it offers opportunities to critically reconsider this past. Moreover, the station presents an opportunity to reset the terms for Detroit's future urban development.

Narratives of growth and elegance

The terminal building is faced with three monumental arches, framed by Corinthian columns and decorated pediments. It is Detroit's nod to the great Roman baths. Rising from this antiquarian base is a broad fifteen-storey tower, a three-part composition of careful symmetry and proportion. Its shaft displays a measure of unadorned modernism, though it is topped with a richly ornamented band and a strong cornice. By its visual singularity, standing alone among one-to-two story structures, the station lends itself to iconic readings.



Hundreds of thousands from Europe and the American south passed through the station upon entering the city: becoming Detroiters, industrial workers, Americans. One resident recently interviewed declared the station to be “our Ellis Island.”¹ Another commentator presented the growth narrative calling the station “a Symbol of a

Grander Past,” stating that while some would demolish the structure, “others see it as the industrial age’s most gracious relic, a Beaux Arts gem turned gothic from neglect.”² Since the City Council threatened demolition in 2009, many preservationists have leveraged this rhetoric of Detroit’s “Grander Past”. The aesthetic value of the structure and its association with the Beaux-Arts style is also called upon to justify preservation.

The station as a symbol of Detroit’s bygone better days contains two interconnected themes: industrial economic might, and the image or lifestyle of elegance that industry made possible. Indeed the sorting and shipping of locally produced industrial goods, which boomed in the first decade of the twentieth century, “was the most important factor in the decision to build a new yard in West Detroit.”³ But while industry drove the new construction, the station’s north façade, its face to the city, emphasized formal elegance. It embodied the Beaux Arts spirit found in several of America’s great urban stations of the period, which infused many downtowns with the civic monumentality and visual harmony of French neoclassicism. Grand Central Station in New York, for example, opened the same year as Michigan Central and was designed by the same team of architects: Warren and Wentmore of New York. Chicago’s Union Station followed in 1925.

¹ Gerritt, Jeff, “Detroit’s ‘Ellis Island’ still impresses,” *The Detroit Free Press*, April 26, 2009, accessed at www.freep.com.

² Saulny, Susan, “Seeking a Future for a Symbol of a Grander Past,” *The New York Times*, March 5, 2010, accessed at www.nytimes.com.

³ “The New Michigan Central Yard at Detroit,” *Railway Age Gazette*, 338, March 13, 1914.



This Beaux-Arts stylistic pedigree was paired with exceptional convenience and luxury. At Michigan Central, a traveling businessperson could stop in the barbershop, finished in white marble, and have a bath in one of eight private rooms of white oak, tile and terrazzo. These served overnight travelers and “out of town patrons,” who could, “change clothes and dress for evening appointments without going to a hotel.”⁴ In a further co-opting of hotel amenities, a light-filled Men’s Reading Room occupied the northwest corner of the station, facing Roosevelt Park. But behind the scenes industry ruled the Detroit station, “As an indication of the amount of freight which originates in Detroit, the Michigan Central requires 95 switching crews every 24 hours to deliver empty cars and pick up loaded ones from the industries along its various lines in the city.”⁵ While primarily built for the sorting and shipping of industrial goods, the station and city were presented through elegant spaces and experiences. The siting of the station, however, reveals that this Beaux Arts formality was built in part on injustice to the very people whose labor made the station possible. Furthermore, this siting did not follow from the civic-minded urbanism that its image may suggest. Rather, it was located by the pragmatic logics of industry, and with a heavy cost.

The industrial logic of a west-side site

The station’s siting can be described as modern: resembling that of Detroit’s emerging industrial sites, where a distant point well connected by transit could serve distant markets and draw users from across the city. The traditional advantages of physical adjacency are replaced by technology. Michigan Central’s business operations connected materials, goods and passengers between the great markets of Chicago

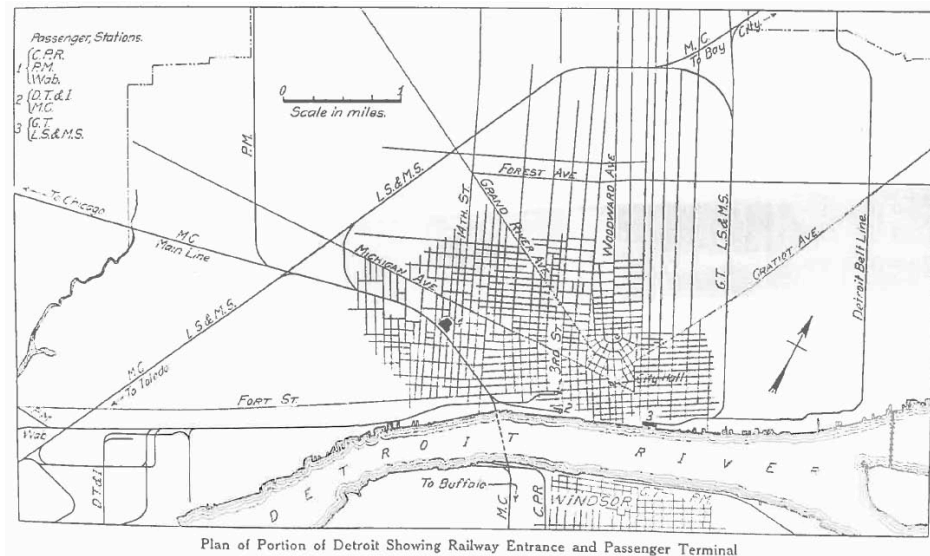
⁴ “Michigan Central Railroad Station at Detroit,” *Railway Age Gazette*, 76, January 9, 1914.

⁵ “The New Michigan Central Yard at Detroit,” 338.

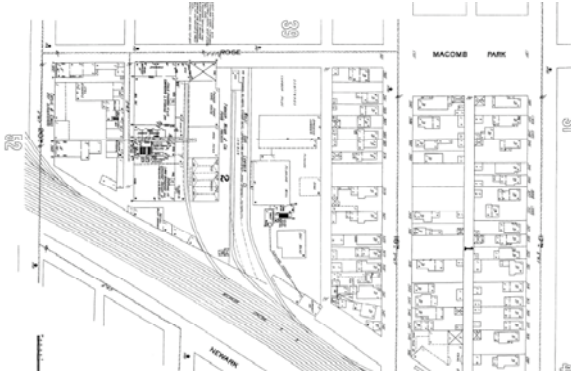


and the port of New York. Following the 1910 construction of a tunnel to Windsor by the Detroit River Tunnel Company, the railroad saw the strategic advantage of a west-side location. It captured traffic from four primary directions, allowing them to converge and switch at the

station. In addition, the Detroit Belt Line circled the outlying industrial sites of the city, delivering local products such as stoves and automobiles to this same site. Unlike its contemporaries in New York and elsewhere, the west side siting allowed Michigan Central to operate as a *through* station, rather than a *terminal*.⁶ Industrial and passenger sorting was therefore accomplished in one place along the main line, rather than gathering passengers separately on a *terminal* branch in the central city. In this way the station's siting has pragmatic origins, despite the elegance that it presents with its iconic face. It becomes clear that Michigan Central is an inherently industrial project, despite the grandness of its vaulted interiors. Sited one and a half miles from the city center, the station physically isolated itself from downtown, and imposed its modern scale on the west-side residential enclave of Corktown, home to many industrial workers.



⁶ Cousins, Garnet R. and Maximuke, Paul, "The station that looks like a hotel," 44-48.



A neighborhood transformed

The low rise neighborhood context of the station was historically home to Irish immigrants, many poor, and was named Corktown after the south-Irish county. Though ethnically diversifying after 1900, it retained its poor and working-class identity.⁷ In 1910 the railroad acquired and condemned three hundred small wood frame houses⁸ to make way for the station. An 1897 Sanborn map offers a sense of what was lost when the land was cleared. Along the tracks were lumber and slaughterhouse operations. Worker's cottages backed up to the mills on narrow lots. Proximity to work, and to institutions such as the Catholic Church of the Most Holy Trinity, was the logic upon which the neighborhood was premised. The constant sensory presence of industry, in sounds and smells, must have dominated the experience of many residents. A public center and needed recreation space was found in the small Macomb Park.



In a second phase of demolition the station's designers created a formal greenspace between Michigan Avenue and the station, "The crowning touch that would give [the station] a distinctive, cosmopolitan air." Despite the power of the railroad and city government at the time, resident lawsuits halted the work until 1918, when the properties were finally acquired and razed. The space was

⁷ Zunz, Olivier, *The Changing Face of Inequality: Urbanization, Industrial Development, and Immigrants in Detroit, 1880-1920*, 272 & 348-349, The University of Chicago Press, 1982.

⁸ Cousins, Garnet R. and Maximuke, Paul, "The station that looks like a hotel," 44.

ironically named for the great conservationist President, Theodore Roosevelt, and was carefully groomed and outfitted with a grid of automatic sprinklers.⁹ The project replaced the shabbiness of working class poverty with an elegant urban image. It was a newly constructed identity of wealth and growth for the station and the west side of the city.

Iconic readings of the structure served the railroad in 1913 and are leveraged for the cause of preservation today, but they are ultimately untenable. They mask the inelegant industrial logic behind the station's isolated siting, and the vanity with which its formal greenspace replaced a working neighborhood.



Conclusion

Our public discourse on the station's future can benefit from reflecting on the problematic narrative of a "Grander Past". Behind the station's façade of elegance are the logic of industry and the work of tens of thousands of

voiceless Detroiters who lived in enclaves such as Corktown. In light of these contradictions a new discourse may emerge, suggesting another way to frame the question of Michigan Central station. Rather than seeking comfort in restoring the growth narrative, the site may become a critical reconsideration of the city's identity. The project may be reframed to de-center the iconic tower, considering the site as a primarily industrial one, and one set in the context of two Southwest Detroit residential neighborhoods: Corktown and Mexicantown. In light of this, the closed formality of the site and station must be abandoned. An urban project must be imagined that engages the needs and lives of residents in direct, tactical ways. The rigidity of Roosevelt Park could give way to a new scale that preferences use over image. The site becomes a place to write an expanded, inclusive Detroit narrative, informed by the contradictions in its history of growth, and embracing the city through its citizens in its present.

⁹ Cousins, Garnet R. and Maximuke, Paul, "The ceremony was 61 years late," *Trains*, p.44-45, September 1978.